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Confluence of Nativity, Relativity and Duality of Transgenderism in and through Laxmi's*

Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life

Abstract: In order to witness the convergence of 'mainstream' with the 'sidelined' there has to be a change in the mindset of the people. As in the past, human beings could develop an unbiased attitude and openness in accepting and recognising the transgenders. The article too aims to accomplish this sort of convergence - meeting of the dominating male and female genders with the sidelined transgenders not periodically, but on a day to day exchange, to observe and attain a liberal community.

The locality of study that the article fixes is India and the transgender community of India is the broad area taken for study and the text taken for study is Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life, authored by Laxmi (an Indian transgender) and Pooja Pande.

Thus through Laxmi's autobiographical text, the study aims to bring out a deeper understanding of transgenderism and transgenders in India. The article primarily emphasises

the following factors: the antiquity that merge with the community, relationship that has to be knit for the transgender community to live and the differences that make the transgender community different - with reference to Laxmi and the duality she possesses.

*Laxmi is the author of Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life but the text is narrated by Pooja Pande.

Keywords - Accolades, differences, transgender, metamorphosis, suppression

1. Introduction: The text taken for study is Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life, authored by Laxmi and Pooja Pande. 'Laxmi' the Indian Transgender woman is the subject of the book which makes the text autobiographical. Through the text taken for study, the article aims to bring out and discuss the following issues: firstly to chronicle the 'conditions' of transgenders in India, secondly to bring about the importance of a 'father figure' - that was outpoured for the upbringing of the transwoman, Laxmi, and thirdly to discuss the 'duality' acquired by Laxmi that make her distinct from other queer group and marks the shared aims of transgenderism.

2. Conditions of Transgenders in India

2.1. Chronicles

Statistically, "The country has an estimated 4 million Hijra's, with communities recorded back more than 4,000 years" (Kumar). The Indian nation has a long history of transgender community attached to it. This condition of prevalence of transgenders in India is also traced in Laxmi's text and is brought out by the article to reiterate the habitation of transgenders in India that sounds not odd but customary. "Historically, in royal families, hijras were patronized by royalty and given positions of great honour; they had a respectable role to

play” (Laxmi and Pande 144). Therefore “ Nobody can say that India has never had transgenders or hijras, or that they are not part of our society—we have records of this in all royal families that depict, in detail, the close associations between royalty and hijras” (Laxmi and Pande 144). Thus a brief history of transgenders in India is patronised in the text; it attempts to break the constructed ideas and the taboos piled over the transgenders in the contemporary times.

2.2. Patriarchy

‘Patriarchy’ - the unavoidable yet insignificant truth of no importance is found to lie behind this state of suppression of transgenders in India, then and now. It also reveals that patriarchy exterminates everything that it finds to communicate equality. It is a dehumanising act that deters the differences and the people possessing those differences. Deterring leads to detention. “Patriarchy doesn’t leave you even when you’re gay, does it? It only becomes about power. Like some of those transmen–women who transition into men—and how they then go over the top with their power play and patriarchal politics” (Laxmi and Pande 165-66).

2.3. Exclusion

Transgender community is one of the ancient ethnicities of the democratic India. Various researches prove that they are homegrown. Their occupancy was transparent in the ancient India “When hijras were patronized and indulged by royalty, they were not only visible but respected. It is this history and tradition of the hijra culture—rich, strong, textured—in our country that I found myself most drawn to” (Laxmi and Pande 7). Another article also states that they had also been part of the royal courts in the Mughal reign. They were assigned important roles; they were made royal guards in the court administration and this status of

theirs changed during British colonisation in India. The hijra community was considered criminals by the Britishers which have let many of them today indulge in sex work and begging (Kumar). What had been done to the homegrown is utterly similar to the genocide; a mass collapse. Their existence today after struggling for ages arises only ambiguity among the present generation and does not generate any spec of passion for the transgenders. The tragic outcome of 'exclusion' and its ill effects are revealed through these two contrasting states of the transgenders, the past and the present.

2.4. The Status of Transgenders

In India, the status of transgenders is diverse. Transgenders are invited among the gatherings to offer blessings and in the meanwhile they are also tampered in the society. They are looked differently in different parts of the country. They are considered both as religious icons- "In Indian culture, especially in the Hindu tradition, hijras are considered upadevatas or sub-gods—they rank higher than mortals, men and women, saints and sadhus as well" (Laxmi and Pande 43) and an outcaste "we are the biggest social outcasts" (Laxmi and Pande 44). These religious contemplations can be actually considered to be some of the factors that keep transgenders alive from committing suicide. A recent study states "Suicidal thoughts and attempts by adult transgender individuals were 14 and 22 times higher, respectively, than rates for the general public . . ." (Asian News International).

"In India, transgender people include hijras/ kinnars (eunuchs), shiv-shaktis, jogappas, Sakhi, jogtas, Aradhis etc" (Athreye). But the streams of transgender community who are largely visible are the trans'woman'. They are addressed with different names. In the text that is taken for study the name that is often employed to address the transgender community is 'hijra'. The hijra community remains a closely knit family. But internally, "There is rigidity

in the hijra community . . .” (Laxmi and Pande 25) because of involving and practicing severe politics in the community (Laxmi and Pande 82).

The culture of the hijra community can be called as a ‘subculture’ of the Indian nation. Though it sounds unheard of, the culture is ancient; it is solid and deepened in the roots of the community and of the country. It provides them a cultural heritage and a profound background. It is of varied customs and traditions.

Lata guru, who went on to become my guru, said, ‘There is no fee, child. If you want to become my chela, come.’ My initiation ceremony, the reet, followed soon after—I was given two green saris, which are known as jogjanam saris signifying the inculcation into a new way of life, and crowned with the community dupatta. (Laxmi and Pande 8-9)

It provides an identity and a family to the people who have lost it. It shelters people from all locales. It merely stands out in accepting people. Its diversity is as similar as that of a ‘new found land’ but the diversity is neither celebrated nor recognised. And sadly the ‘subculture’ does not find a space too to occupy in the ‘popular culture’.

Most of their rituals are performed in darkness and in isolation. “When a hijra dies, we wait for dusk, for everyone to fall asleep. Then we steal through the night like thieves to offer last rites to our comrades, escaping everyone’s attention” (Laxmi and Pande 74). They are intensely emotional and so is their culture. There are reasons for their intensified behaviour. Lack of education is one main reason for their crudity. “It is seldom by choice that most hijras are hijras—it is, in fact, the lack of education and opportunities that force many to find refuge in the hijra world” (Laxmi and Pande 8). Children who suffer gender nonconformity are denied recognition at home. It is because in most cases, people at home are unaware of gender nonconformity and are also unready to gain knowledge about it. So they end up in acquiring lot of misconceptions about it. They consider it a shame too. As an outcome, children leave their house and stop their education too. Lack of warmth and care lead them to

stagnation in every aspect of their life. Finally to find the lost, they seek shelter in the hijra clan. “They say that hijras bond through pain, their ties are forged in pain and suffering” (Laxmi and Pande 84).

3. The Father’s Role in Laxmi’s Life

3.1. Laxmi’s Striking Achievements

The life of hijra Laxmi is different from other hijras and her achievements are unique. She is categorized under transgender achievers. She is a hijra who the hijra community and the other minority/majority look up to. She gained ‘care’ that is most required for the growth of every transgender. ‘Care’ made her escape vulnerability. The one important factor for it is the warmth she received from her father.

Another important factor that comes in line is the ‘education’ she gained. ‘Education’ has made her strike a balance in her life. All these made her to achieve a unique position in the society. She plays responsible roles as that of a writer and an activist; responsibilities that aims at eradicating darkness from the community.

Laxmi has an innumerable record of achievements. From a model coordinator to a TED Talker, her journey is worthwhile to reflect on. She has gained an identity for herself. Her gender identification is transwoman, but her eternal identification would be her achievements. The person she evolved talks for her. Her talents are hard to dislodge. “Her oratory skills are tremendous and one of the many things that I’ve been trying to learn from her” (Laxmi and Pande 130).

The closely knit community gave her enclosure which she felt would shun her ‘motives’. She did not stay in complete attachment with her hijra family but at the same time she was not completely detached from her biological family. But she had access to both. She says that both her biological family and her community family are dear to her and they all stay together

(95). She aimed for independence and she gained it. Her independence made her venture 'Astitva' and also made her scale unimaginable heights. She and some of her friends in 2006 established 'Astitva'. It means existence and identity. It is a non-profit organization aiming to work with sexual minorities and symbolized their fight for existence (Laxmi and Pande 27). We founded Astitva as a fight for our existence, and I think we did achieve a lot. We are the youngest civil rights movement that got a Supreme Court verdict, which had a bill passed by the Rajya Sabha. We are, every day, achieving what we set out to. The Maharashtra government's policy on women is the first in the entire world to have a chapter on TGs and sex workers. (Laxmi and Pande 30)

These achievements not only denote the victory of Laxmi but also denote the victory of the deteriorating transgender community of India. The same is undergoing the next phase of uplifting through its flag barriers like Laxmi.

In order to prevent the age old transgender community from extinction, strategic living should be adopted in the transgender community. Ideological barriers should be overcome by strategies to promote humility and oneness. The execution of these strategies should be transparent. There has to be openness to these strategies among the transgender community and the society that gaze at them. Strategies proposed by leaders from their own community like Laxmi who understand the transgender differences should be brought into power. "At another event, as I recall, Laxmi spoke about how hijras could be employed as security guards—because they'll never touch women—and how it would lend dignity of life to the community. This is a point she repeats often; she has even said this on national radio, in fact, and it's such a valid point to have transgender police guards" (Laxmi and Pande 130). These kinds of working plans should be implemented to make the hijra community live because by living they could progress. The community should curtail darkness and strive to implement the ideas that work for and with the community.

3.2. The Father's Upbringing, an Important Factor for Laxmi's Striking Achievements

Laxmi's father Chandradev Chandinath Tripathi's initial level support has been a stepping stone for every great augmentation of Laxmi. Her father has been a pillar of support to her till his death. The parenting received from her father made Laxmi to live a 'successful' transgender life even after her father's death. He has nurtured the 'father child relationship' and its importance. His actions were humanitarian and he never behaved uncivil with the differences possessed by Laxmi.

He was once asked in an interview, 'Don't you feel ashamed that you're a Brahmin and your eldest son is a hijra?' And he replied, 'Why should I feel ashamed? No educated man or woman goes into their son's or daughter's bedrooms to see what they are doing there, do they? Laxmi Narayan has his own choice to do what he pleases. My child is not handicapped, my child is not mentally challenged, my child is different, his sexuality is different and that doesn't bother me. Nobody throws away a desi ghee laddoo, whether it comes out perfectly round or misshapen. My child is and will always be my child.' (Laxmi and Pande 19)

Chandradev Chandinath Tripathi is a 'hero' personified. He has been a protector. Hailing from a Brahmin community, he was open to differences. "Why, after all, would a male child belonging to an affluent, upright Brahmin family initiate himself into a cult, a tradition, a section of society that's much reviled by the mainstream?" (Laxmi and Pande 7-8). He accepted his son and also his struggle with 'gender identity'. Therefore he has set an example for, every household and for all the parents who are rearing a gender nonconforming, child or a grownup. Time to time, Chandradev Chandinath Tripathi has been a pillar of support to Laxmi.

He offered her the education she required. He encouraged her in promoting the talents she possessed. "There was a time when dance was my life, but my father always supported me, he never objected to anything. He never came to see any of my dance shows—that would be

asking too much, even from him—but he gave me the liberty to do whatever I wanted” (Laxmi and Pande 20). He always made sure that Laxmi is aware that her father is with her in everything. From a conservative family and from an orthodox caste Chandradev Chandinath Tripathi has bound to love, the love for his son. It’s the true concern that has to be saluted. His responsibility has actually saved Laxmi from exploitation. “If it weren’t for him, I would have been standing in a brothel, selling my body. I would have been HIV positive by now” (Laxmi and Pande 21). He provided emotional support to Laxmi. “That man always loved me. Can you imagine how strong one has to be to give that kind of love, to love someone like that? It can only be a father. It was my father” (Laxmi and Pande 22).

He respected Laxmi and never denied her rights. His physical and mental support was also combined with economical support. His heir was given the power to exercise property rights. In a TV show Laxmi’s father has declared. “‘As my eldest son, Laxmi Narayan is heir to my property in Mumbai and Uttar Pradesh,’ he had said” (Laxmi and Pande 153). This passion of a father is dubitable but open doors to adaptability.

Both Laxmi and her father reciprocated the love they had for each other. His love gave her the space to indulge in her deeds and to her father she took back achievements which made him proud. “When I went to the UN—the first Indian transgender activist to do that—he said, ‘Oh, see my child. Whatever else there is or anyone says, Raju has definitely made me proud’” (Laxmi and Pande 154). Even her sisters’ families are proud of her (Laxmi and Pande 153).

Chandradev Chandinath Tripathi has taught others too, the art of ‘acceptance’. He has been a spokesperson for ‘reality’. He has always stood firm for the ground realities of gender nonconformity. His words encrypted in the text deconstruct the notions attached to gender nonconformity. “A hijra can be born to any family. If we shun them from our lives and homes, we leave them with no choice but to become beggars. I would never do that to someone in my family’ ” (Laxmi and Pande 153). He had given space for both Laxmi and

‘Transgenderism’ both in his heart and in his home. “When I joined the hijras, it was Papa who had the second room at home taken off rent, so that I could continue to stay at home, as a hijra” (Laxmi and Pande 153-54).

It is observed that for an infant, the one certainly with differences in gender should be taken good care of and should be offered especially the father’s attention for the growth of the child as witnessed in the case of Laxmi. The results of the following studies also support the same. “Looking at 36 studies from around the world that together involved more than 10,000 participants, Rohner and co-author Abdul Khaleque found that in response to rejection by their parents, children tend to feel more anxious and insecure, as well as more hostile and aggressive toward others” (Society for Personality and Social Psychology). “A father’s love contributes as much -- and sometimes more -- to a child’s development as does a mother’s love. That is one of many findings in a new large-scale analysis of research about the power of parental rejection and acceptance in shaping our personalities as children and into adulthood” (Society for Personality and Social Psychology). Therefore the inscriptions from the text and the study results employed in the second part of the article expound the statement that what has to be replicated is, not the unison in rejecting transgenderism but unison in accepting transgenderism that the article sharply proposes throughout its unfolding.

4. Duality

Gender duality and how Laxmi is distinct as a hijra and how her community is different from the other queer group are dealt in the third part of the article.

As hijra, I can access both states of being—and I can also go beyond. In my strongest moments, I feel what a man feels, the power games that they like to play. And when I’m shining in my femininity, driving men crazy, I feel more like a woman than even the most

womanly of women one could imagine. Like Cleopatra, or Umrao Jaan—both ultimate symbols of femininity. (Laxmi and Pande 9)

Both the man and the woman in Laxmi spearhead in her. This is the duality that the article culls out to dictate, the exceptionalities of Laxmi and shared aims of transgenderism.

4.1. Womanhood

Womanhood is oozing out of Laxmi but the ‘man’ ‘Raju’ in her is hidden and is alive. The man in Laxmi is brought to life for the readers in her book through the chapter titled “Raju’s Monologue” which strongly states the mysteries in her. “Raju lives and breathes inside me and no matter what I think or do or say, or how much I fight as an activist for transgenders’ rights. Despite the breast implants that make me feel like a woman and my saris and my precious lipsticks, Raju will always live and breathe inside me” (Laxmi and Pande 147-48).

There is clarity in her conception of ideas though it sounds different.

Whenever I hear the term ‘transgender’, which we hear so often these days, I always feel that it implies ‘transcending gender’. Identifying as transgender, I connect with being hijra the most—the word ‘hij’ refers to a holy soul and the body in which it resides is ‘hijra’, hence they say the soul is hijra. As hijra, I can access both states of being—and I can also go beyond. (Laxmi and Pande 9)

Thus, she has broken the binaries that lie in her community too. Her independence is outspoken. Some recordings of Laxmi’s interview too state the same. “Many hijras are castrated, but it’s not compulsory. They say it’s the soul which is hijra. We feel we are neither man nor woman, but we enjoy femininity. I enjoy womanhood, but I am not a woman. It’s very confusing” (Seervai).

As a transwoman she wanted to possess womanhood. “I have wanted to be a mother ever since I was a child myself. If there is one emotion I knew I wanted to fully understand and

experience, it was of motherhood” (Laxmi and Pande 66). She extended hands to be responsible and she seriously exercised those responsibilities. “I was ready to feel the giving and nurturing side of womanhood and so, even though I was very young, I felt I was ready to be a mother. And when the opportunity arose, I took it” (Laxmi and Pande 66). She was generous enough to share ‘care’. “I anyway think of my students as my children and I adopted Deepak as my son” (Laxmi and Pande 67) whom she met through dance. It is observed that Laxmi has other desires too which she related to womanhood. “I see my wedding as any other girl sees it. As a woman, I want it like any other woman” (Laxmi and Pande 186). She had an obsession for makeup too. “I never step out in public without my make-up—everyone knows this about me” (Laxmi and Pande 117). Prince Manvendra too has mentioned about this characteristic of Laxmi in his monologue. “Now I know that her make-up itself is a process that takes an hour or two, so I have to bear that in mind” (Laxmi and Pande 140).

4.2. The Man

The ‘Raju’ in her periodically adorned Laxmi when the need aroused. “When they did the thread ceremonies of their sons, which is a very significant milestone in a Brahmin boy’s life, an important and sacred coming-of-age ritual, I went for it as a brother. I fulfilled all the responsibilities that befall an older brother as per tradition . . .” (Laxmi and Pande 149).

Laxmi chiseled her identity both as a woman and a man.

4.3. Neither Man nor Woman

Besides these identities, Laxmi never approved or assured to neutralise or categorise her age old transgender community with the other queer group. She has a point to make and is traced in her text in the arguments she have with her comrades. She argues with her comrades.

“Ashok never liked the fact that I called myself a hijra that I claimed hijras are different from gay men, that we do not belong to the MSM category. I have always been emphatic in making this difference clear—MSM is a behavioural aspect, I do not belong to that group. I am a community, I am a hijra, a different being altogether. I am definitely not a man (Laxmi and Pande 162).

For instance, compared to transgenders, gay men don't find themselves getting short-changed as much at the workplace because they can conventionally switch over when required—they can be all-male in the work environment if needed and carry on, being given the same opportunities as, say, straight men. But trans people are visibly trans, it's who they are, so they can't suddenly transform themselves and behave according to prescribed norms around the time of promotions and appraisals at work. (Laxmi and Pande 24)

In an interview Laxmi has again made her point. “Being called gay is worse. I remember when I started fighting way back in 1999, and I said the state doesn't have the right to use my gender to club me into “gay.” (Seervai) and she says adding “When somebody asks me, “Who are you?” I tell them, “I am the oldest ethnic transgender community in the world, which has its own culture and own religious beliefs.” And we are in four countries in South Asia: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Terai region of Nepal” (Seervai).

4.4. The Unique Gender

There are studies and observations too which argue the complexities of transgenders and their behavioral strategies. “ ‘Gay’, ‘Lesbian’ and ‘Bisexual’ refer to sexual orientation, in other words – who you are attracted to. A man who is attracted to other men could identify as ‘Gay’ or ‘Homosexual’ ” (Kaplan). “ ‘Transgender’ is often used to mean ‘Transsexual’ (Transgender refers to a larger group of people than that) has to do with one's gender identity. Gender Identity is how one identifies in terms of maleness or femaleness” (Kaplan).

Being a victim of gender nonconformity, she got stuck between gender nonconformities, between gay man and a drag queen at an early stage but later she confined herself to the hijra community and has clearly stated her mind. This state of gender nonconformity of Laxmi is encountered by some children at infancy and Laxmi is brave enough to voice out these childhood barriers. These clear statements of difficulties should no longer be muted.

Gender duality exists in Laxmi and is therefore is common among transgenders. Another strange truth is that every person who assumes to be normal and free from gender nonconformities are also trapped in duality which tends to be curtailed. “ We all have both in us, after all, and we choose to only express one or the other at any given point in time” (Laxmi and Pande 108). But as transgenders, they neither cheat themselves nor the society; they transform into the gender they yearn for. They are free from hypocrisy but not the people who assume to be rational.

5. Conclusion

The characteristics of both men and women are lying within the physical and mental framework of the transgenders. It appears quite complex but it is the uniqueness of the community. This unique rarity should not be abused but made productive. They can be employed in the place of a man and also a woman and could also replace a man or a woman. Thus the duality propagated in the third part of the article account to a dimensional study of the transgender community.

Transgenders have battles to fight which initially for them is a state of disparity. To overcome disparity, they need support. On accepting and understanding these differences of the third gender, the probability of these differences appearing foreign may be lessened and support rendered would be heightened. These drawings from the third part of the article are the major findings and emphasis of the article, whereas the observations listed in the first and

the second part of the article promotes a diversified approach towards the transgender community. All of these contemplations add to the results of the article.

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